

CELEBRATION

A small town in New Hampshire celebrates the Fourth of July with a parade down the common, about 1850.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness . . ."

These words, which Thomas Jefferson penned for the Declaration of Independence, celebrated an ideal of liberty, an ideal which takes on a renewed vigor and meaning as the United States observes its two hundredth anniversary.

Jefferson's words were agreed upon by the Continental Congress, meeting at the State House in Philadelphia, some time on the evening of July 4, 1776. Nobody remembers the exact time, but records indicate the day was clear and the temperature in the low 70's. There was no fanfare: a Resolution of Independence had actually been voted two days earlier, and this was only a formal flourish.

It took time for the idea of independence to reach the length and shallow breadth of the thirteen colonies, and for the celebration to begin. In Boston, ten days later, the document was read to a crowd in front of the State House: "The Bells rang," Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John, who had helped Jefferson, with the drafting, "... the cannon were discharged ... & every face appeared joyfull. . ."

That celebration has grown through the years: it has come to mean parades on village greens and marching bands and annual neighborhood softball games and hot dogs eaten under a flag on the front porch. It has grown so familiar to us that we have trouble grasping the fact that the Declaration is two hundred years old. Where once nations proclaimed victories as a measure of their greatness, we commemorate the notion of freedom gained.

